

Women in Religious Leadership and Interfaith Dialogue: The Challenges Faced and Possible Solutions

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This article emphasizes that women have a great deal to contribute to the field of interfaith relations but can face critical challenges in what has long been a male clergy-dominated field. I present a brief history of the rise in women's ability to become clergy, particularly in the United States, then I look at some of the gendered modesty requirements in parts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and how that can play a role in preventing women from fully participating in the relationship-building portion of interfaith work. I then underscore how all of these factors combine to put women at a disadvantage in certain interfaith situations, before I ultimately suggest ways in which we can come together and ensure that all people committed to doing this important work—including women—can fully join in making the world a more understanding, respectful place through dialogue.

Keywords: Interfaith, multifaith, women, dialogue, modesty, clergy, physical touch, rights

ממצרים ישראל נגאלו הדור באותו שהיו צדקניות נשים בשכר
- סוטה יא:ב

In the merit of the righteous women that were in that generation,
the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt.¹—Sota 11b

Women have enormous power to bring to the field of interfaith relations.² The world has changed in incredible ways in the past two centuries, including and especially in the realms of women's rights and interfaith dialogue. Women are able to take on roles in society that our ancestresses could not have fathomed. Particularly when looking at Western culture, women can theoretically hold any role that men can hold—in the workplace, in politics, in the family, and more. We have a great deal further to go in the fight for true equality, but we cannot deny the enormous strides that were made by our crusading foremothers that have brought us to this amazing time in history with so many opportunities available to us.

In fact, interfaith relations has grown exponentially so that it can be recognized as a formal field of its own. Around the world, societies have come to realize that the ancient way of religious communities keeping to themselves and remaining insular as a form of protection does not work: we need to be in relationship with others if we want to build understanding and respect, and so make the world a more peaceful place. Increasingly, especially in the West, we see dialogue groups, multifaith events, and more becoming a societal norm that helps foster positive relationships among the religious and non-religious alike.³ Especially at a time when violence in the name of religion is

¹ This text and translation come from Sefaria.org.

² I utilize “interfaith” and “multifaith” interchangeably in this article.

³ My personal interfaith work often actively includes those who would identify as “non-religious.” It is thus important to me to make the note that “interfaith” dialogue is indeed a misnomer, though it is the most widely accepted term we have available to us, and so I continue to utilize it. Additionally, this article will focus on the particular challenges caused by those claiming religious issue with certain gender interactions as outlined by traditional sectors of the three

all too often seen in the news, we need people of strong faith and non-faith traditions to come together and show the world that there is an alternate, peaceful path we can walk together.

The combination of the growth of these two movements—interfaith dialogue and the women’s movement—has also meant that women increasingly seek a space in the activities of the interfaith movement, especially as they have increased opportunities in certain groups to attain higher levels of religious leadership. Throughout much of the history of the major world religions, women have been kept from leadership, either formally or informally, for a variety of reasons. This then led to the circumstance that, as the formal field of interfaith dialogue emerged in the twentieth century—often led by religious clergy as they formed relationships with other religious clergy—women were de facto excluded, even though it was likely not intentionally done in many circumstances. The leadership of male clergy in this field then may have set the tone for dialogues remaining male-dominated, even at the local level where women, theoretically, could have had more access. Women’s increased ability during the past few decades to become clergy or otherwise take on religious leadership roles in a variety of religious traditions has only increased the possibility that women could be more fully welcomed the table for these dialogues, and yet they still serve as a minority in many interfaith dialogues. As with all other areas in which women are striving to assume leadership roles for the first time, a number of challenges arise that render the changes difficult. Some are based in the modesty and gender norms of various religions, while others are more subtle and likely are based in misogyny and the long history of male dominance in the field of religious leadership.⁴ Given my largely Western perspective and experience, this article will focus on these challenges as they relate primarily to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In many cases, it seems likely that the lack of women in certain interfaith settings was not necessarily intentional, but actually developed naturally because of their absence from formal ministry until fairly recently in human history. However, this development means that leaders of all gender identities must take note of unspoken discrepancies in accessibility to this work so that we can create a more level playing field across the board. The most dire need in this area lies with raising awareness of the challenge of unequal gender representation in dialogues, as well as figuring out how to bring women and other minorities forward so that they may have active roles in the work, if they so desire it.⁵

faith groups considered herein. The exclusion of explicit discussion of non-religious participants is not done to minimize their critical role in the field, but merely to allow space for a fuller discussion of the specific issue I present.

⁴ I am aware that gender as such is a complicated topic in itself, and cannot so simply be split only into “female” and “male,” with many people identifying with both or neither or otherwise. However, given the continued general norm of these as the main dividers in society, and especially because religion has generally (though not exclusively) historically focused upon these as the two main categories of gender, for the purpose of my argument on behalf of women here, I will focus only on “female” and “male,” leaving an analysis of the role of non-binary/queer individuals and their place in interfaith dialogue for another analysis. I note here that they are active in this work and face their own challenges to which we should pay heed, as well.

⁵ Those minorities excluded from dialogues certainly differ based on country, region, societal context, and more. In addition to women, certainly we can observe in the U.S. a lack of racial diversity in many dialogues that merits significant attention. Indeed, a variety of local and national dialogues have indicated awareness of this in recent months and seek to rectify it. We also see a discrepancy around age, as at least in certain upper-level dialogues, in which many participants are around middle-age or later. Intentionality around recruiting and welcoming individuals earlier in their careers could bring in a new variety of opinions and perspectives that might lead to new, positive directions in the work these groups are undertaking.

Women necessarily bring an enormously important set of different viewpoints to the table that obviously differ depending on the individual, but contribute regardless. They can offer insight into the female experience in society and specifically religious settings, for example, and they can further comment on female-specific experiences of religion in dialogues on specific topics (such as, for example, observant Jewish women on ritual purity in the *mikveh* following giving birth, or Muslim women on the experience of eating during Ramadan when pregnant). These are experiences that are critical realities of living out different faiths upon which most men simply cannot comment in the same way. If we want our dialogues to be authentic and reflect the wide range of views in our religious and non-religious communities, having a diverse community participating in them is essential, and women especially need to have equal seats at the table. Together, we can make sure that the needs of everyone are respected, without excluding anyone who comes with a genuine commitment to moving our world forward in this way.

If our goal in coming together in dialogue is to create greater understanding and respect between communities, than we necessarily need to have those dialogues accurately reflect the diversity of those communities in order to ensure that these are full, authentic experiences. This means making sure that women have a place, in whatever way feels right and comfortable to them based on their own and the community’s needs and values. Any discussion of this topic thus requires some basic understanding of the role of women more generally as participants in various religious communities. Today, this can manifest in a variety of ways of multifaith settings, from being a non-issue to causing women to be all but left out of the conversation due to a variety of challenges, and is something greatly dependent upon the origin countries and cultures of those involved or the communities hosting the events. It is critical that on the whole, we find mutually acceptable ways to make sure all who come to participate in this holy work are able to do so to the fullest of their ability.

Women Clergy in the United States: A Brief History⁶

While women have long taken on a variety of leadership roles in their religious communities, it is only in the past few decades that major religious movements in the West have opened up the possibility for females to ascend to the highest levels of formal religious leadership. Some of the long-held restrictions are due to specific religious beliefs (for example, some Christian groups believing that since Jesus’ disciples were all men, religious leaders should thus only be men) and other times for different cultural reasons even unrelated to religion (for example, in communities that hold the opinion that women belong in the home, as opposed to leading in public). This, of course, varies across religions—and even within the religions themselves—but the trend across the board has generally been to allow women to reach new levels of formal leadership in their communities. Indeed, it seems the call for female ordination stretches back at least several centuries. Research by Pamela S. Nadell and others confirms that women were attempting to

⁶ For the sake of space, I confine my brief history of the rise of women clergy to the United States. Please note, however, that my work has happened both in the United States and internationally, and so the issues I present, both the challenges and suggested solutions, are intended to extend beyond the confines of one country. We live in a globalized world in which cultures are meeting more than ever before, and the fact that women can be ordained in certain places and religions and not others does not negate the impact of those women in power than coming into contact with men and women who believe otherwise. Indeed, these differences only heighten some of the issues raised here.

become rabbis in the late 1880s.⁷ We know then that there were women at least considering the possibility of attaining religious leadership, whether in seriousness or in jest, at least by the nineteenth century.

We then saw in the mid-twentieth century the beginning of the formal ordination of women in certain movements/denominations of different religions. Especially, even though women were being ordained earlier, it seems the 1970s was a critical time in this regard.⁸ It is estimated that, in the 1970s, the number of women in the clergy went from 7,000 to 16,000.⁹ A major change had begun and would only continue to grow in subsequent decades. An example of this trend was the appointment of the first woman as lead rabbi of a Jewish congregation. Up to this point the few females ordained as rabbis had been relegated to assistant positions. When Rabbi Linda Holtzman, who had been ordained at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Pennsylvania in 1979, took the head position in a Conservative synagogue in Pennsylvania, she shifted the trajectory of female rabbis in the United States forevermore.¹⁰ The year 2019 marked the fortieth anniversary of her appointment, which helps us understand just how short a time it has been since women in Judaism have been able to hold formal roles of this type.

Since the significant upswing of the 1970s, women have been able to reach new heights in their religious denominations. In the Episcopal denomination of Christianity as an example, women have been able to ascend to the role of bishop, “the highest ordained status in the church,” since 1989.¹¹ The 1990s saw a continued rise in the number of women clergy, so much so that by 2000 there was a claim that, “Women now constitute about 10 percent of all American religious leaders...and their ranks continue to expand...”¹² As time has gone on, women have continued to play an increasing role in many traditions.

However, even as the possibility for women to become clergy expands, there are many groups within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that still do not allow women to be formal clergy. Examples include the Catholic Church, portions of Evangelical Protestantism, portions of Orthodox Judaism, and Islam. Although women can attain positions of status in these communities to varying degrees, they are still restricted from formal clergy leadership in most cases. Whether or not these groups then choose to send male or female representative to interfaith dialogues, conferences, events, and so on, their participants will come into these situations with notions about specific ways in which women are limited in their roles in society. To be sure, many in these groups would claim that women are not “lesser” for being barred from this particular role in the community, but that the genders have different roles to play, generally considering it mandated that they specifically do not work as clergy. Regardless, it is critical to consider the context members of these groups bring when they join dialogues.

⁷ Pamela S. Nadell, Director of the Jewish Studies program at American University in Washington, D.C., makes this point, cited in Ilene Schneider, *Contemporary Jewry* 21, no. 1 (2000): 147.

⁸ Sullins, Paul. “The Stained Glass Ceiling: Career Attainment for Women Clergy.” *Sociology of Religion* 61, no. 3 (2000), 243.

⁹ Roger Stump, “Women Clergy in the United States: A Geographical Analysis of Religious Change.” *Social Science Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (1986), 337.

¹⁰ Kenneth Briggs, “Only Female Presiding Rabbi in U.S. Begins Her Work in a Small Town.” *The New York Times* Aug 16, 1979.

¹¹ Sullins, “The Stained Glass Ceiling,” 245.

¹² Laura Olson, Sue Crawford, and James Guth. “Changing Issue Agendas of Women Clergy.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39, no. 2 (2000), 140.

We would do well also to mention that just because someone is a member of formal clergy does not mean that they will necessarily do well in interfaith dialogues, nor that they may want to be there, or that they have enough power to represent their community well. Women who attain clergy positions may still struggle to be seen as strong leaders. Male clergy may not have personalities that lend themselves to this type of relationship building. Women in traditions without formal female clergy may find themselves holding significant power, even without a title. While there may not be proof of direct correlation between the presence of women in clergy and their suitability or interest in interfaith dialogue, the fact that this field has grown mostly via the work of formal religious leaders means that we should take note of how the rise of women ordained as clergy aligns (or not) with their ability to make inroads in certain interfaith settings.

Modesty and Gender Norms in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Among adherents of each of the three Saraic/Hagaric/Abrahamic religions (that is, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), we find a wide range of attitudes toward the need for gender separation in order to achieve a holy life.¹³ Generally, faith-based gender-separation rules are intended to preserve what would be considered a moral sexual ethic—to prevent members from crossing lines into an “inappropriate” realm. However, the degree to which sectors of these religious groups feel a need to draw boundaries in order to protect against any kind of impropriety varies widely.

On the liberal end of the spectrum for all three faiths, adherents follow what could be considered the “secular norm” in terms of interaction and physical touch. This means that spending time with members of the opposite gender is not generally seen as a threat. Casual physical contact would generally also be considered appropriate and acceptable—a handshake in the United States, for example, or an exchange of kisses on the cheeks in mainland Europe. Many Jews, Christians, and Muslims would willingly and comfortably follow these general standards, and not feel them in conflict with their own religious beliefs and practice.

More conservative adherents of these three faiths, however, find it necessary to draw tighter boundaries in order to establish modesty guidelines that fit with their conception of their religion. A general set of rules shared among observant members of the three faiths would call for avoidance of any physical touch with someone of the opposite gender who is not in their immediate family. It would also call for avoidance of spending time with someone of the opposite gender in any kind of private setting that could lead to impropriety or even merely give the impression of it. A more extreme version of religious modesty and gender separation, however, almost completely removes women from the public sphere. In Judaism, this could be called *tzniut*, or modesty. As Andrea Lieber explains: “The concept of *tzniut*...involves a sense of women’s piety in which the absence or invisibility in the public sphere is valued.”¹⁴

We see a similar concept in Islam with the various veiling choices some women make in order to preserve their modesty. These range greatly based on the particular Islamic practice to

¹³ By “Saraic/Hagaric/Abrahamic” religions I mean those that, traditionally, trace their lineage back to the relationship between Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham.

¹⁴ Andrea Lieber, “A Virtual Veibershul: Blogging and the Blurring of Public and Private among Orthodox Jewish Women.” *College English* 72, no. 6 (2010), 623.

which a woman subscribes, her age, her culture, her location, and so on. While many Muslim women in the west have chosen to adopt the *hijab*, a veil that generally covers one's hair and neck, others wear more fully-covered options, such as a *niqab* or *burka*, arguing that such garments allow women to venture into the public space while somehow remaining private, thus preserving their modesty, as well as discouraging any inappropriate male attention. Certain Christian groups also maintain boundaries of women's dress—requiring covering one's knees and elbows, for example. A few such groups mandate a specific style of head covering. Generally speaking, in all three religions, these rules aim to prevent what is deemed “inappropriate sexual contact,” which usually means sex outside of the bounds of a religiously-accepted marriage. Physical touch is often also prohibited, anywhere from prohibiting more full contact like a hug or kiss, down to people avoiding shaking hands with someone of another gender, which in the secular society of the West is generally considered perfectly acceptable. In the most extreme version of these rules—and followers of these extremes do exist in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—even talking to someone of the opposite gender who is outside of one's family is prohibited. As with the veiling rules and rules around physical touch limitations, the intent here is to build a type of fence in order to prevent even the beginning of something that could lead to sexual impropriety.

In 2017, the matter of religiously mandated gender separation made news in the United States when a profile of Karen Pence, wife of Vice President Michael Pence, referred to a 2012 comment made by Mr. Pence to *The Hill* in which he claimed he would not eat a meal alone with a woman other than his wife.¹⁵ Apparently, he is aligned with a group of Christians who feel so strongly that the genders must be separated that their convictions mean they will necessarily exclude women even from professional situations for this reason. Similarly, Robert Foster, a political candidate, declined to allow a female reporter to follow him on the campaign trail for a day because, he claimed, he also ascribed to a rule that prevents any time alone with a member of the opposite gender—something some term the “Billy Graham Rule.”¹⁶ These fences that guard against impropriety may seem extreme to those who hold more liberal views, but those who consider them part of their faith hold onto them as tightly as they may to their prayer practice. However, the implications that such rules have for women working in interfaith dialogue cannot be ignored.

In an article speaking specifically about women's place in the synagogue traditionally, Rachel Harris explains:

Women, if and when they are considered at all, are purposefully sidelined and contained, their bodies subject to regulation. Their very presence offers the possibility of contamination and disruption. This can be seen not only in their position in the synagogue, but also in the extended discussions of women's bodies, duties and purposes within traditional Jewish texts.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ashley Parker, “Karen Pence is the Vice President's ‘Prayer Warrior,’ Gut Check and Shield.” *The Washington Post*, March 28, 2017.

¹⁶ Monica Hesse, “The ‘Billy Graham Rule’ Doesn't Honor Your Wife. It Demeans Her – and All Women.” *The Washington Post*, July 11, 2019.

¹⁷ Rachel Harris, “Introduction: Sex, Violence, Motherhood and Modesty: Controlling the Jewish Woman and Her Body.” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 23 (2012), 5.

This author is responding to a notion, prevalent in very conservative circles, that women are inherently tempting, or sexual, and somehow need to be limited. She states further that, “I have come to understand that control lies at the center of any discussion of a Jewish woman’s body.”¹⁸ Although this is not the proper space for a lengthy discussion of the link between religious modesty standards, control, and misogyny, suffice it to say that regardless of the original root or intent of the rules that many religions establish to govern proper behavior between members of different genders, it all too often leads to excuses for negative treatment of women.¹⁹

In an even more stringent version of these types of boundaries, we see women removed from public life in all ways. For example, a 2013 journal article describes gender-based segregation in certain parts of Israel, in which “women’s images have been erased from ads published on billboards and on buses.”²⁰ In another example, this one from 2015, an Orthodox Jewish newspaper deleted all women from a photograph of many people, one of whom was arguably one of the most powerful women in the world: Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel.²¹ This erasure of women, even if mainly happening in specific, extremely religious subgroups of the faiths, nonetheless can inform some participants who come to diverse multifaith events and so needs to be considered seriously. Whether these efforts are undertaken from a genuine desire to maintain modesty and prevent impropriety, or instead stem from a misogynistic, patriarchal culture, they nonetheless impact women’s ability to be full participants, fairly and rightfully, in settings of interfaith dialogue.

Types of Multifaith Situations on Which I Am Focused

First, we must define the type of multifaith setting in which I am suggesting we need to reevaluate how to include women in a fuller way. When we speak about interfaith dialogues, I suggest we focus on settings in which members of different faith or non-faith groups come in order to explicitly interact with those of other faiths in a meaningful way—either by speaking about their own traditions, or by participating in some kind of project that still has those differences implicitly as part of it.²² This means an event purposely set up to encourage interaction across lines of difference, not a general event that happens to include that mix of people. These could look like, for example, a formal panel of faith representatives talking about poverty, an intentionally multifaith effort to feed the hungry, praying side by side the traditions’ different prayers, people coming together for formal dialogue over a meal, and so on. Situations where the relationships formed may be just as important as the outcome sought by the specific event itself. It would not include, though, as an example, a secular movie screening to which people of many faiths come just because they all happen to live in a particular place. It is the intentional situations to which I refer.

¹⁸ Harris, “Introduction: Sex, Violence, Motherhood and Modesty,” 6.

¹⁹ For a case study of gender separation in Israel, its flawed arguments, and how it negatively impacts women specifically, you can refer to Zvi Triger’s article, “The Self-Defeating Nature of ‘Modesty’— Based Gender Segregation.” *Israel Studies* 18, no. 3 (2013): 19–28. Although he offers primarily one specific example of how so-called religiously-based modesty rules can impact women, Triger in this piece underscores several critical nuances in how the rules negatively impact women’s ability to fully participate in society.

²⁰ Zvi Triger, “The Self-Defeating Nature of ‘Modesty’— Based Gender Segregation.” *Israel Studies* 18, no. 3 (2013), 19.

²¹ “Israeli newspaper edits out Angela Merkel from front page on Paris march.” *The Guardian*, Jan. 14, 2015.

²² For a succinct presentation of some dialogue models, and particularly with a view to how women fit into them, consider Jeannine Hill Fletcher’s article, “Women in Inter-Religious Dialogue.”

Interfaith dialogue also takes place on a variety of levels—from local to national to international. While it is possible to find local groups perhaps not run by clergy, often on the national and certainly the international level, the field is still often dominated by recognized faith leaders. This makes sense on the one hand because those individuals have the knowledge to be able to offer deep insight into their own tradition, which is often a part of interfaith dialogues even on the international level, but renders the gendered history of the clergy still relevant in a fairly young field of formal interfaith dialogue. When dialogues take place with individuals from places where not only do women clergy not exist, but women are societally seen as incapable of doing certain tasks (whether that is leading in general or anything else), the gender issue certainly comes up in relevant ways. Regardless, as alluded to above, even if those participating in the dialogue themselves may not fully follow the strictest modesty rules, or if they are women (even if not formally “clergy” *per se*), they are influenced by the more conservative modesty attitudes and so these challenges must be acknowledged and dealt with.

It bears mentioning that many women clearly have an interest in this area of interfaith work. This can be seen in the women clergy who have already become involved in interfaith dialogue even given their significantly lower numbers across the board in the clergy still today (for example, in national U.S. dialogues and at international interfaith conferences), the existence of specific women’s interfaith dialogues such as the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom as well as local groups, and more. It is the combination of both demonstrated interest, and the fact that many upper-level formal dialogues at least are still dominated by clergy, that leads me to suspect that it is indeed the historic ban on women clergy in many traditions that has significantly contributed to the unequal gender balances and different treatment of women in these settings. However, not all of these spaces are by definition clergy-only, and could thus still (and do, though to a limited degree) welcome in women who are not formally ordained.

Challenges for Women in Interfaith Settings

Women already face the generally massive challenge in interfaith dialogue as they do in so many other fields: trying to make inroads in a realm that has long been dominated by men. To some extent, we have a slight advantage in interfaith dialogue because as a formal field it has not existed for as long as some other fields, and so we can help to forge a path for ourselves in this relatively new area. But even so, women are necessarily at a disadvantage when facing millennia of history of male clergy leading the different faith groups, as the women try to break in themselves.

A number of issues can arise for women working in interfaith settings, regardless of whether they are formally ordained clergy. One major issue that women face in these settings, perhaps less obvious to the men around us, is the challenge of differing modesty standards across faith groups and how this impacts the ability for women to fully participate in interfaith dialogues. For example, if the male Catholic priest and male Muslim imam and male Orthodox rabbi come together to share a hug, or even just a handshake, oftentimes this would exclude women due to traditions around avoiding touch with someone of another gender. Sometimes a photograph might be taken in which the male leaders all come together with arms around each other’s shoulders, but the women are excluded or at best kept off to the side so as not to imply any physical contact. These may seem like small issues, but they can lead to a significant difference in how the group relates to the women in the room compared to the men. If part of a group is building enough of a relationship to share in a hug or come together close for a photograph, inevitably those who do not participate

are subconsciously at a disadvantage in the group. Physical affection is one way to build closeness with others.

Another critical issue that these situations can cause for female leaders in interfaith settings is that consciously or subconsciously, we are all too often seen at least as “different,” and at worst as “lesser” or “not to be approached.” The rules around modesty, those historic religious boundaries now serve to prevent women from assuming their deserved level of accessibility in dialogue settings. While there may be those men whose beliefs so strongly prevent them from interacting with women to whom they are not related that they cannot overcome their barriers to participate—and certainly we need acknowledge that religious rules and cultural attitudes are separate, if at times, related challenges in this area—we as individuals committed to equal opportunity for all to the interfaith field absolutely need to continue pushing men to recognize that they can interact with women in a way that does not threaten their boundaries, but grants women equal access.

What if the same issue were raised around race? Or country of origin? If someone openly registered for an interfaith event and marked that they were unwilling to speak to a person of color because of their “religious beliefs,” it would not be someone we could welcome into the space. We have to begin to realize that women deserve this same level of respect, and make sure that those who attend events are at the baseline able to interact with women if they are joining in a mixed-gender group, and also are aware of the disadvantages women face in these dialogue settings when very observant men are present. In interfaith dialogues, it is often key to remember that the right people will always be the ones in the room, and even if that means fewer people or that certain people are not yet ready for this type of dialogue, we need to make sure we are holding people to the highest standards when they enter our space—including, by being able to more fully and respectfully include women in that dialogue.

Another challenge women may face in interfaith settings is around less obvious social norms of speech and space. In many cultural settings, especially long dominated by older men, finding the space to utilize one’s voice as a woman and especially as a young woman can be challenging. Gaining the attention of the man leading the conversation, for example, so that you can contribute, or holding the attention of the men present in a largely-male space, may demand extra effort to make happen. Also, as with any mix of people, demanding the respectful attention of those listening (i.e. making sure the attendees do not hold side conversations while someone else is speaking or look at their phones, etc.) can often be all the more challenging when you are a minority in the room. Furthermore, while in the same vein as not necessarily being gendered but likely influenced therein, is creating equal space for balanced gender voices. This means when a question is asked of a panel of multiple men and one woman, for example, that the men are aware of when they have spoken more than the woman and give space to her. We as women have an obligation to claim our own space—but we also need help from our devoted male allies to be aware of how they need to step up to bring us into the space more fully.

We also need to consider the fact that some women may feel that they are eager to engage with those of other faiths, but they themselves cannot be in close contact with men from outside their immediate families (similar to some men) or would not want to be photographed in the setting. When no perfect solution exists across the board for all communities, we may then need to consider options such as dialogues separated along gender lines, and indeed largely female interfaith spaces

have found great success (including the national Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom in the U.S., and a local, thriving program called Visionary Women, run by Interfaith Philadelphia, a significant local non-profit).²³ These experiences, whether or not they are based on specific restrictions on being in women-only spaces, nonetheless regularly offer opportunities of greater comfort for those who seek solidarity in spaces absent men. They also imply a clear interest by women in this work. This solution, though, would also necessarily mean that some spaces are male-only, which of course could afford more comfort for those men seeking out those arenas. But all of these choices, which over time have seemingly largely evolved naturally, should be made now with intentionality and forethought, with the various elements of communities weighing in on the decisions made about gender. As with much of this work, each event needs to be tailored to the specific community, but hopefully with an eye toward allowing more people to participate however is deemed acceptable.

Furthermore, different considerations emerge if a community decides that some dialogues or programming should be separated by gender, most notably the balance of power. For example, in a community that contains mainly male clergy and female lay persons, efforts must be undertaken to promote both dialogue experiences (the men separate from the women) as different though equal in significance so that not only the male clergy dialogue comes across as important. Simply by holding awareness of power differentials in different communities can have a huge impact in how these experiences are advertised and reported upon after the fact, so that all engagement across lines of difference is shown as inherently holding deep meaning as they move communities forward in understanding.

Ideas to Ameliorate Gender Challenges

There are very clear ways to respect the religious needs of those men and women who have modesty boundaries outside the typical Western norms, yet can still allow women access to these types of dialogues. The first step is of course to get a sense before the event of who will be in the room. From where do these leaders come? How do they identify religiously? What do they say themselves about their religious needs? Sometimes this can be as simple as including some questions on any pre-event registration, though at times it may involve additional research or conversations. Once we are aware of those needs and restrictions, which will likely differ somewhat with each particular event, we can better plan how to accommodate participants in a way that allows everyone to fully and completely, to an equal degree, participate in the interfaith activity.

If the event is more than a local casual event, this pre-event space can also be a time to assert standards being held for the dialogue, if any pushback on gender is expected. For example, the facilitator might articulate that the event will welcome those with differing modesty standards and might establish some rules—such as, “if you are going to shake hands with anyone, you need to be willing to do so with everyone participating” or “please know that photographs will be taken and that participants in this event need to be accepting of mixed gender imagery.” Setting this up from the beginning can help avoid some of the issues that might arise later.

²³ Some female interfaith spaces, including Visionary Women, are intentional about also offering space to individuals of different gender identities in a world that continues to grow in its awareness of varying gender identities. Their website states, “We use an inclusive definition of ‘woman’ and welcome trans and genderqueer women.” www.interfaithphiladelphia.org/visionary-women

The design of the event, once one has a sense of the restrictions participants feel bound by, should reflect the audience in a way that encourages participation for all. The event should not include moments of explicit physical contact if there are those for whom that might be uncomfortable, so we would do well to avoid holding an opening session at an interfaith conference that involves hugging, for example. It might mean that whomever is selected to lead a communal prayer at the beginning of the session articulates that everyone should clasp their own hands, so as to avoid any issues with women and men holding hands for the prayer, as is tradition in some groups and could lead to men only touching men and leaving women out in this way. It might even involve finding point people for the different traditions (perhaps the ranking bishop at a conference) and having frank conversations about the need to ensure women are just as included and able to participate fully, and for that reason encouraging limiting physical contact of all kind during the conference or event. Having the leaders of the different traditions model this will also help set the standard for other clergy observing their actions and so ensure equality for all participants. Also, making sure that if formal presentations are to be given, the speakers include women as well as men can further assist with the visibility of female participants.

During the event, it can be helpful to have men well-versed in these issues of gender parity and who know the standards set for the event (such as limiting physical contact for all, or limiting it to handshakes) hold the other men accountable if they seem to be acting too comfortably with other men and avoiding the women. All too often, it is on the women to try to bring themselves into the conversation, which can be uncomfortable when it is clear the men feel insecure speaking with the women. However, merely raising and considering the issues of modesty and gender in these settings, and dealing with it intentionally, is what can at least start making a significant difference. Forethought can make a significant difference in this area.

Additionally, having someone selecting speakers in an informal moment of dialogue who is aware of this challenge and can make sure to welcome input from women and men equally can also make an important difference. Ensuring that any panel at the conference needs to include at least one woman, for example, could help set the norm. Also articulating the group’s commitment to this balanced gender intention in writing (perhaps in a conference booklet distributed at registration) will help raise awareness of the issue. During any opening sessions, many of which often include community agreement setting when participants are encouraged to collectively set standards of interaction by which they will all abide, an organizer can highlight that it is required that they set one community agreement around equal opportunity to participation for all present—including women. Upper-level dialogues on the national and international levels should make concerted efforts to bring in new participants that reflect the actual diversity of their communities (unless it is a dialogue for an intentional subset therein, for example just clergy or just youth, etc.), for example having a specific meeting include a requirement that each participant bring a new person who increases the diversity of the group in some way.

Some of these practices and similar are already being tried in religious spaces in general, such as male allies refusing to serve on religious panels that do not have at least one woman presenting, or when women were highlighted at the most recent Parliament of the World’s Religions in Toronto in November 2018 during a significant celebration. However, they ideas have not been implemented across the board for us to have a better understanding of the best ways to make these practices the norms in large and small dialogues. More research needs to be undertaken

into these ideas, but we can certainly begin with some of these and see what impact (if any) they have.

Many of these ideas stem from the idea that a simple awareness of the disadvantage women face from the beginning in these dialogues can lead to creative thinking around ways to make sure we are valued and heard in these events, just like the men. From the relatively recent history of women actually being allowed to become formal religious clergy, to the fact that certain parts of the faith groups do not even permit talking to women outside of the immediate family, to the fact that relationships in these settings sometimes grow stronger through physical contact between the male participants in a way which may be forbidden to the women, these challenges are very real and poignant when we are trying to establish ourselves as key players in these multifaith dialogues. This is all the more the case when we consider the natural human inclination to subconsciously develop positive feelings toward others from simple interactions we may not notice—such as sharing a conversation or a hug. We as women will continue to advocate for our right to be at the table, whether we are clergy or lay people, whether we personally advocate to be in a mixed setting of gender-specific, but it is essential that our male colleagues also find ways to make sure there is a full, equal seat for us when we arrive.

Conclusion

In the end, what many women in this field want is the ability to have just as significant a role in this work as do men. The field of multifaith work has countless women who are passionate about the way in which this work can change the world for the better, women who have unique ideas that could really move us forward in incredible ways. For many of us, this is important, meaningful, holy work, and one way that we can change the narrative of our world from one of fighting and despair to one of dialogue and hope, which absolutely must include participants who reflect the diversity of our communities in order to be authentic. The long history of a male-dominated religious leadership and the modesty guidelines still in place to varying degrees for people of different faiths can sometimes add an extra layer of challenge for women working hard to be involved in this field, whether or not they themselves are clergy or adhere to various modesty standards. However, with awareness of the challenges and some intentionality in the planning and execution of programs, we can find a way to balance the religious needs of all with the genuine right of women to be at the interfaith dialogue table.

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